

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 9, 2013

The Honorable Loni Hancock
Chair
Senate Public Safety Committee
State Capitol, Room 2082
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Tom Ammiano
Chair
Assembly Public Safety Committee
State Capitol, P.O. Box 942849
Sacramento, CA 94249

Dear Senator Hancock and Assemblymember Ammiano:

We are very pleased to hear that you will be holding a Joint Hearing in the Assembly and Senate Public Safety Committees on the conditions in California prisons. As leaders in California's state legislative bodies, you have an important platform with which you can review these pressing issues and encourage changes to our correctional system that promote effective rehabilitation of California's prison population.

We have serious concerns with the solitary confinement of inmates, often for indefinite periods of time. Beyond the question of whether the physical and social isolation of individuals in a cell for 22 - 24 hours per day qualifies as cruel and unusual punishment, it has been recognized as leading to or intensifying mental illness among inmates. In fact, individuals in solitary confinement attempt suicide at higher rates than those who are in the general population, further showing that this practice is counterproductive to rehabilitation efforts.

Of particular concern to us is the solitary confinement of juveniles in the criminal justice system. Youth are particularly vulnerable to the potential harms caused by this extreme form of punishment because they are at such a formative stage in their mental development. Too often, the mental health of youth subjected to solitary confinement deteriorates to the point of self-harm or suicide. The restrictive and stressful conditions of solitary confinement can also affect the physical well-being of youth in the form of stunted growth, hair or weight loss, or the temporary loss of menstruation. Further, the lack of contact with visitors or educational materials for youth in solitary confinement can prevent the social and educational development of our youth.

California's scarce fiscal resources should not be spent on expensive and ineffective policies. California's taxpayers deserve a correctional system that rehabilitates individuals and prepares them to reenter society. Building solitary confinement prisons costs two to three times more than conventional prisons; however, solitary confinement prisoners are less likely to have had access to rehabilitative and educational programming that aids in their ability to reintegrate into society after they complete their sentence and reduce the risk of recidivism.

While there are times when solitary confinement may be necessary to protect or manage inmates, California's prisons should exercise a greater degree of restraint and caution when deciding to subject individuals to solitary confinement. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation can best achieve public safety by investing in rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives, rather than the detrimental overuse of isolation discipline.

Thank you in advance for your leadership on this important issue. We look forward to working with you and your respective committees as you look to reform California's prison management strategy into a system that effectively uses taxpayer dollars and promotes safe communities.

Sincerely,



TONY CARDENAS
Member of Congress



KAREN BASS
Member of Congress